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The Argument in favor of Chriſtianity drawn from the Character and Diſcourſes of Chriſt.

A

SERMON

PREACHED AT

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MATT. XVI. 15. 16.

He ſaith unto them, But whom ſay ye that I am?

And Simon Peter anſwered and ſaid, Thou art Chriſt, the ſon of the living God.

AMONG the various arguments which may be urged in the defence of our religion, none is more cogent in itſelf and more adapted to every capacity, than that which is derived from the character and diſcourſes of Chriſt. To eſtimate the validity of ſome other evidences may require a compaſs of learning and a cloſeneſs of inveſtigation which are in general the portion of the profeſſed ſcholar alone: but an attentive peruſal of the Evangelical pages will enable us to form a correct judgement of the conduct of our redeemer, and of the concluſions which may be deduced from it in favor of the divinity of his miſſion. The character of Chriſt ſhould be conſidered as an extraordinary phænomenon; of which the reſemblance had never appeared

before, and we may venture to aſſert will never appear again. Of this phænomenon an unprejudiced philoſopher will endeavour to diſcover an adequate ſolution: and that alone can be deemed an adequate ſolution, which is capable of being applied to every part of the character, and which unfolds the whole with coherence and probability. The hiſtorian may attempt to account for the *propagation* of Chriſtianity by the influence of human or ſecondary cauſes: yet unleſs he can explain upon ſimilar principles the undertaking of its founder, the divine origin of our religion will remain firm and unſhaken. To prove that this cannot be accompliſhed, is the deſign of the following diſcourſe. But it will be neceſſary to premiſe, that in ſtating the facts on which our concluſions are grounded, we take for granted the authenticity of the Evangelical narrations which do not compriſe events of a miraculous nature: theſe cannot in the main be controverted with any appearance of reaſon: and the writers of the Goſpel hiſtory muſt at leaſt be allowed to furniſh as faithful a portrait of their teacher, as the chaſte and eloquent compoſitions of Xenophon and Plato exhibit of their maſter Socrates.

It will be difficult for the ingenuity of ſcepticiſm to deviſe more than four hypotheſes, which can with the ſmalleſt plauſibility be advanced to elucidate the character of Chriſt:—either that he

was an enthuſiaſt:—or that he was a mere teacher of morality:—or that he entertained a remote deſign of proclaiming himſelf a temporal Meſſiah:—or that he deluded his followers with the viſionary proſpect of affording them a ſpiritual deliverance. If none of theſe hypotheſes ſhould be able to maintain their ground, will it not unavoidably follow that Jeſus was a divine inſtructor?

I. First then let us conſider whether Chriſt was an enthuſiaſt.—To determine on the moſt rational foundation, in a controverted inſtance, whether an individual is entitled to the appellation of an enthuſiaſt, we ſhould carefully examine thoſe parts of his conduct which are not comprized within the ſcope of the accuſation. If his ſentiments and actions ſhould be here illuminated by ſagacity and regulated by judgement, we ſhould be inclined to ſuſpect that the charge was alleged by ignorance and folly. The cloſer the alliance is between the confeſſedly rational and the ſuppoſed enthuſiaſtic traits of the character, the greater is the ſecurity with which this criterion may be applied. Were a phyſician of real and acknowledged ſkill in his profeſſion reported to maintain extravagant opinions in theology, the vigorous exertions of his underſtanding, which would have been eſſentially requiſite to eſtabliſh his reputation on a durable baſis, would amply juſtify us in ſuſpending our belief. But ſhould a ſimilar

cenſure be extended to his own peculiar department, we ſhould boldly reject it as a groundleſs and malignant calumny. In vindicating however ſuperior abilities from the charge of partial enthuſiaſm, I muſt be underſtood as confining my defence to abilities which in certain caſes are acknowledged to be under the guidance of a ſound judgement. I readily allow that uncontrouled genius may ſometimes ſoar to the heights, and ſometimes ſink into the gulphs of enthuſiaſm:—that men of ordinary capacities may ſometimes think and act wiſely, and ſometimes abſurdly: but their wiſdom will not aſcend above the common buſineſs of life. Whereas ſolid talents are not only adequate to the inveſtigation of the moſt ſubtle arguments and the direction of the moſt critical conjunctures, but are generally uniform in their operations; and the diſplay of ſagacity in one inſtance ſhould be received as a pledge of it in another.

To the excellence of the Chriſtian morality every impartial judge muſt chearfully bear teſtimony. Some cavils indeed have been raiſed againſt a few of its precepts; but they have proceeded from an ignorance of the extent of their application, and from an inattention to the circumſtances under which they were delivered. Yet though the Chriſtian morality is excellent, it is at the ſame time ſevere. It enters into no truce with the indulgence of

irregular propenſities or with the undue gratification of the paſſions: the former it commands us entirely to exſtirpate; the latter to maintain under due ſubordination. Such a morality would be ill adapted to the natural temperature of an enthuſiaſt: and what he would ſcarcely be able to practiſe himſelf, he probably would not be forward to recommend to others. Among the precepts which compoſe the Chriſtian ſyſtem of duty, there is none to which it is more difficult to yield a perfect obedience than that which enjoins the ſincere forgiveneſs of injuries. That warmth and impetuoſity of temper, which is at once the cauſe and the effect of enthuſiaſm, is too prone to call for revenge. Yet that Chriſt himſelf exemplified this precept under the moſt trying ſituation in which humanity can be placed, is ſufficiently evinced by his memorable prayer on the croſs, *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*

The morality therefore which was taught by the author of our ſalvation, and the perfect conformity which he himſelf exhibited to one of its moſt arduous branches, muſt be allowed to afford a ſtrong preſumptive argument that he was far removed from the character of an enthuſiaſt. A ſimilar concluſion may be deduced from that extreme caution and conſummate addreſs, which he diſcovered, when enſnaring queſtions were propoſed

to him by his enemies. That on theſe occaſions, when the proſpect of danger was uncertain, he ſhould poſſeſs ſuch a ſhare of prudence, yet that, when his adverſaries were about to ſtone him, he ſhould be under the influence of ſuch a wild enthuſiaſm as to aſſert, *Many good works have I ſhewed you from my Father*, if he had actually wrought no works among them,—is ſuch a ſingular inconſiſtency of conduct as the advocates of this hypotheſis will find difficult to explain.—The argument will receive additional force when we conſider, that the morality which Jeſus taught, and the wiſdom which he manifeſted, were ſubſervient to the execution of one important plan. Now upon the principle we have already laid down, diſcrete and able management diſplayed in one part of a ſcheme will afford a more rational ground for the expectation of it in another, than if the former inſtance, in which it was exerciſed, be unconnected with the latter, in which it is preſumed.

This evidence we confeſs to be only preſumptive: yet at the ſame time it amounts to ſuch a high degree of probability, that it deſerves to be oppoſed by ſomething more ſatisfactory than conjecture and ſuſpicion. But the Evangelical narrations will furniſh us with examples, which *directly* prove that Chriſt was not an enthuſiaſt; as they are occurrences of that preciſe nature, in

which his enthuſiaſm, if it had exiſted, would naturally have appeared. When he was preaching in the ſynagogue at Nazareth, the audience *were filled with wrath, and roſe up, and thruſt him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill, whereon their city was built, that they might caſt him down headlong. But he paſſing through the midſt of them, went his way.* When Jeſus had ſaid unto the Jews, *Verily, verily, I ſay unto you, Before Abraham was, I am; Then took they up ſtones to caſt at him: but Jeſus hid himſelf, and went out of the temple, going through the midſt of them, and ſo paſſed by.* Enthuſiaſm being a ſuppoſed communication with a ſupernatural being, and not limited in its influence by ſurrounding realities, preſumes to expect that the aſſiſtance of heaven will be as often renewed as it may promote the end, for which it is fondly imagined to have been originally vouchſafed:—it ruſhes into danger, that the glory of the Deity may be diſplayed in reſcuing its votary by a miraculous deliverance; and places the perfection of virtue in tempting the Lord. Had Chriſt therefore been under the dominion of this deluſive affection, he would have ſuffered the Nazarenes to have caſt him from the brow of the hill, that the power of his Father might have been manifeſted in ſuſpending the violence of the fall:—he would have ſubmitted to be ſtoned by the Jews, that the aſſaults of his adverſaries might have been diſcovered to be impotent.

ENTHUSIASM is ſanguine and confident of ſucceſs:—it repoſes a firm reliance on its own energies, when they are believed to cooperate with the counſels of a ſuperior power. Yet Jeſus was ſo far from truſting to his perſonal endeavours for accompliſhing the object of his miniſtry, that he refers the ſucceſs of it to an event, which in all human probability would have rendered it abortive. *And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.* In the ſequel of the narrative of which the text is a part, we read that Chriſt gives aſſurance to Peter, that *he* was the rock on which he would build his church; and that the gates of hell ſhould not prevail againſt it. Yet this future pillar of the church not only deſerted his maſter with the reſt of the diſciples, but even thrice denied him. Had Chriſtianity been nothing more than an human inſtitution, the crucifixion of its founder would, on every rational calculation, have been ſpeedily followed by the exſtinction of the ſect; and the laſt moments of Jeſus would have been embittered by the foreſight that his unwearied exertions for the welfare of mankind would be completely fruſtrated by the malignity of his enemies. But though fully and deeply impreſſed with the horrors of his approaching ſituation, he confidently aſſerts that his death was neceſſary to the production of an abundant harveſt. Can the hiſtory of enthuſiaſm produce a parallel or even a reſemblance?

II. Secondly let us proceed to enquire whether Chriſt was a mere teacher of morality.—By a mere teacher of morality I underſtand an inſtructor, who inculcates it from a regard to the beneficial effects, which the practice of it will produce in the preſent ſtate of exiſtence. Such a teacher will deſcant on the beauty of virtue and the deformity of vice:—he will carefully point out the unalterable tendency of the former to prolong life, to enſure domeſtic tranquillity, to acquire friends, and to eſtabliſh reputation. Should he think proper to enforce his precepts by adding the ſanction of a future retribution, he will only have recourſe to it as a collateral motive. His own belief of this important article, without the aſſiſtance or the reception of revelation, can amount no higher than to probable conjecture. Socrates himſelf cloſed his memorable defence by ſaying to his judges, that he was going to death, they to life: but which was the beſt, was unknown to every one, except to the Deity. A prudent teacher of morality will not lower the credit of the ſcience which he profeſſes, by relinquiſhing the ſolid ground on which its utility may be maintained, and which may be demonſtrated not only to the reaſon, but to the experience of his diſciples, for the ſake of fixing their attention on that undiſcovered country, from whence no traveller has ever returned. But the abſurdity of his conduct would be conſiderably enhanced, if he believed

not himſelf that inviſible recompence, by which he endeavoured to operate on the affections of his hearers: as he would in this caſe deſert not a certainty for a probability, but a certainty for a non-entity. Now it is remarkable that our Saviour, except in one or two inſtances, never ſtrengthened his precepts by temporal conſiderations, but animated the fidelity of his converts by holding out the joys of heaven as the prize of their conſtancy. Yet he did not conceal the conſequences, which would in this life reſult from the profeſſion of his religion. Do we find length of days ſpecified in the liſt? *Yea the time cometh that whoſoever killeth you, will think that he doth God ſervice.* Is domeſtic tranquillity inſerted in the number? *A man's foes ſhall be they of his own houſehold.* Does the acquiſition of friends conſtitute a part of the catalogue? *Ye ſhall be hated of all men for my names ſake.* Laſtly, Is the eſtabliſhment of reputation mentioned? *Bleſſed are ye, when men ſhall revile you, and perſecute you, and ſhall ſay all manner of evil againſt you falſely for my ſake.* We ſee then that Jeſus not only deſerted the ground, on which as a mere teacher of righteouſneſs he ſhould have vindicated the dignity of his profeſſion, but even reverſed the picture of conſequences, which a moral philoſopher would have delineated as reſulting from the practice of his ſcience.

But we may proceed a ſtep farther, and aſſert, that, if Chriſt was not a divine inſtructor, he could not poſſibly believe the doctrine of a future retribution. For he would have been guilty not only of impiety and blaſphemy in arrogating to himſelf the final judgement of mankind, but of the laſt cruelty and injuſtice—in expoſing his followers to the hardſhips of a moſt rigorous perſecution, and deluding them with the expectations of that celeſtial recompence which he had no power whatever to beſtow. What an exemplary puniſhment muſt he have dreaded as his portion for the propagation of ſuch a pernicious deception!—Perhaps it may be urged that Chriſt, from his ſagacity and knowledge of the heart, might imagine it to be an eaſier and more effectual method of enſuring obedience to his precepts, if he operated on the hopes and fears, than if he endeavoured to convince the underſtandings of his hearers. But he could entertain no reaſonable proſpect that this plan would be crowned with ſucceſs. We have already ſeen that the profeſſion of his religion would to his immediate diſciples be attended with the loſs of every thing which is dear and valuable to men; and that the natural tendency of his morality, however beneficial, would be ſo completely obſtructed by external impediments, that, as far as the firſt converts were concerned, he could by no means be conſidered as a benefactor to the world. What adamantine chains of union could he poſſibly forge, which would

ſo unalterably attach the Apoſtles to his cauſe, as to induce them under the moſt gloomy apprehenſions to diſſeminate the doctrines, after the ignominious crucifixion, of their maſter? And even admitting that he was able to have ſecured their fidelity, what reaſonable preſumption, we may ſtill enquire, could he form that mankind would be perſuaded to give attention to their preaching? Had they endeavoured to recommend the Chriſtian ſyſtem of morality, *Phyſician, heal thyſelf*, would have been the language of their reception: and that religion which was the inſtrument of ſuch ſevere calamities to the teachers, could not be expected to procure a more favorable treatment for the hearers. Chriſt therefore by ſuch a conduct would have added to the charge of wickedneſs the imputation of folly.—That Jeſus was a good man, has been allowed by the champions of infidelity: yet this conceſſion moſt abundantly proves that they had conceived no correct views of his character, as exhibited in the Evangelical pages: ſince from the preceding ſtatement we may be juſtified in concluding, that if Jeſus be allowed to have been a good man, he muſt at the ſame time be allowed to have been a divine inſtructor.

III. THIRDLY let us examine whether, as ſome ſceptics have inſinuated, Chriſt entertained a remote deſign of proclaiming himſelf a temporal Meſſiah.—It has been aſſerted by an

illuſtrious critic *, that if Chriſt had been a pretended Meſſiah, he would have appeared in the character which was generally expected by the Jews. But to the validity of this obſervation I can by no means aſſent. Should it be conceded that Jeſus was an unaſſiſted teacher, he muſt be allowed to have poſſeſſed too much ſagacity to have engaged, without the neceſſary reſources, in ſuch an hazardous undertaking; which was followed by the overthrow of thoſe daring adventurers, who at that period embarked in ſuch a perilous cauſe. He would doubtleſs therefore have adopted a circuitous method of accompliſhing his plan:—he would have carefully concealed his deſigns, till they were ripe for execution; and would have ſcaled the ſummit of ambition by the footſteps of humility. Yet notwithſtanding this impenetrable reſerve, he would not have carried on the deception to ſuch a length, as might ultimately have obſtructed his favorite purpoſe. He would have preached up morality to a certain extent; but would have ſuppreſſed every precept which might have claſhed with his views. How does the conduct of Jeſus correſpond to this theory? When James and John were eager to conſume with fire from heaven the Samaritans who received not their maſter, Jeſus rebuked them and ſaid, *Ye know not what manner of ſpirit*

* Dr. Bentley.

ye are of: for the ſon of man is not come to deſtroy mens lives, but to ſave them. Jeſus could alone ground the moſt diſtant proſpect of ſucceſs on his ability to enliſt in his ſervice ſuch a conſiderable body of the Jewiſh people, as might have preſented a formidable oppoſition to the diſciplined valor of the Roman legions, the embittered malice of the chief prieſts and rulers, and the remaining portion of the multitude, which prejudice and ſelf-intereſt would have retained on their ſide. Yet even if the contending parties had been in ſome meaſure reduced to an equality, the conflict would have been deſperate and doubtful. With what exhortations was the courage of the diſciples invigorated? Was their ardor inflamed by the animated eloquence of the antient generals? The tortures of the wounded, the groans of the dying, and the triumphs of the conqueror, conſtitute no objects in the ambition of a Chriſtian hero. The precepts of Chriſtianity tend to ſoften and humanize the ſoul, and to diſqualify it for engaging in ſcenes of carnage and devaſtation. *The ſon of man is not come to deſtroy mens lives, but to ſave them.* Under the impreſſion of ſuch doctrines, which ever reſounded in their ears, the ſwords of the firſt converts would have fallen bloodleſs from their hands; and they would have ſurrendered themſelves an eaſy prey to the vindictive fury of their enemies. This text therefore muſt be conſidered as affording a

deciſive evidence, that Jeſus could not entertain a remote deſign of proclaiming himſelf a temporal Meſſiah.

IV. Fourthly let us attempt to aſcertain whether Chriſt deluded his followers with the viſionary proſpect of affording them a ſpiritual deliverance.—It muſt be confeſſed that the moſt ſolid dominion is that which is uſurped over the conſciences of men. Refined therefore and deep-laid ambition, while it poſſeſſes the ſubſtance, may be content to be deprived of the trappings, of greatneſs. Yet this ſpiritual tyranny, however lowly and unaſſuming in its external appearance, is always found ſecretly to rejoice in the acceſſion of worldly ſplendor; and omits no opportunity of ſtrengthening its foundation by the collateral ſecurity of titles and riches. But ſo far was the conduct of Jeſus from being actuated by theſe ſecular motives, that it was directly calculated to diſcourage the wealthy and powerful from embracing his religion. When the young man, who had large poſſeſſions, came to our Saviour to aſk him, what good thing he ſhould do that he might inherit eternal life; Jeſus concluded his inſtructions by commanding him to ſell whatſoever he had, and give to the poor: but he went away ſorrowful. Had the views of our Redeemer derived their origin from the principles of worldly policy, he would have recommended the

diſtribution of a *part* only of the property: he would have ſuperintended the diviſion of it himſelf:—he would have retained his opulent convert; and increaſed his popularity with the poor. This incident in the life of Jeſus not only ſubverts the hypotheſis, with which we are at preſent concerned, but the two former which we have already diſpatched; as it is equally inexplicable, whether Chriſt be ſuppoſed to have been a mere teacher of righteouſneſs, or to have entertained a remote deſign of proclaiming himſelf a temporal Meſſiah. It can indeed be ſolved only by admitting, that his conſciouſneſs of being aſſiſted by a ſupernatural power determined him reſolutely to decline every overture and connection, which might afford the leaſt handle for ſuſpicion, that ſecular influence was employed in the propagation of Chriſtianity.

By this time, I truſt, we are ſufficiently prepared to enter into the full force of the declaration in the text: *Thou art Chriſt, the ſon of the living God.* For if we have ſhewn that Chriſt was neither an enthuſiaſt, nor a mere teacher of morality,—that he did not intend at a future period to become a temporal Meſſiah, and that he did not aſſume the feigned character of a ſpiritual redeemer;—muſt we not unavoidably conclude that he was a divine inſtructor?

In a concern of the laſt importance I would neither willingly be deceived myſelf, nor would I wiſh to deceive others: but in the foregoing train of reaſoning I am not conſcious of any flaw. Should the validity of it be admitted, it affords a conciſe and ſatisfactory proof of the truth of our religion,—adapted to every capacity,—unembarraſſed by the ſubtleties of criticiſm and the labyrinths of learning. May it be attended with the happy influence, which it was calculated to produce! Let us prove all things; but let us hold faſt that which is good. When upon examination we are convinced of the divine origin of Chriſtianity, let us maintain the profeſſion of our faith without wavering. Above all, let the confirmation of our faith be the improvement of our practice; that when Chriſt, who is our ſhepherd, ſhall appear, we may receive a crown of glory with this deciſive ſentence of approbation, *Well done, good and faithful ſervants, enter ye into the joy of your Lord.*

FINIS.

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